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FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5573

INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE

RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 0091

RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 3680

RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 7189

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 4771

RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 4426

RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 1278

RUDKIA/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 0786

RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA 1006

RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI

RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 2988

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0651

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS

RUEKJCS/Joint STAFF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 RANGOON 000033

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STATE FOR EAP AND IO; PACOM FOR FPA

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TAGS: PGOV PREL CVIS PREF PHUM BM

SUBJECT: CHIN STATE: WHERE THERE IS WILL, THERE IS A WAY

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Classified By: CDA Shari Villarosa for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶11. (C) Summary: Charge visited the northern half of Chin State December 6-10 on a UNICEF-organized trip with other diplomats. This is another very pro-American area of Burma due to the past influence of American missionaries. Almost everyone we met spoke of the desire of Chin people to work in the U.S., and they made it clear it was for economic reasons rather than due to discrimination. The government presence was surprisingly small, probably due to the lack of exploitable resources. UNICEF projects have been well-received with UNICEF commonly working with religious organizations to expand the reach of their health and education programs beyond government schools and hospitals. We also saw many local NGOs, primarily church-based, working to improve the situation of ordinary people. This visit reinforced the perception that Burmese people are able to organize themselves to advance the common good, notwithstanding a repressive government. End Summary.

Meet the Chins aka Zomis

¶12. (SBU) Chin State is Burma's most sparsely populated state with 500,000 people living across 14,000 square miles. The three towns we visited, including the capital Hakka, only have a population of roughly 20,000 each. The state has few paved roads, no airport, minimal electricity, no resources, steep terrain (every town we stayed was over 5000 feet in elevation, with the highest peaks over 10,000 feet-we saw no flat land), and deforested and depleted soil. With cherry trees in full bloom, it appeared similar to Colorado in the spring. It is one of the coldest places in Burma with temperatures this time of year below freezing at night and rarely reaching 70 degrees in the full sun. UNICEF advised us to bring sleeping bags and heavy coats due to the lack of heat.

¶3. (SBU) The population is predominantly Christian, with many Baptist Churches, as well as churches representing the Assemblies of God, Methodists, Foursquare Gospel, Anglicans, Salvation Army, Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Presbyterians, Seventh Day Adventists, and others of indeterminate denominations. The strong Baptist affiliation was credited to American Baptist missionaries who went to Chin State 107 years ago, and not only converted many former animists, but also provided Chin dialects (reportedly over 100; the Bible has been translated into 30 dialects to date) a written language using Romanized script. Religious affiliation appeared a key identifier with most homes posting their church affiliation as well as their names.

¶4. (C) Most Chin are subsistence farmers growing millet and corn on the steeply pitched hillsides. Slash and burn agriculture, combined with a growing population that requires wood for heating and cooking, has pretty much deforested the Chin hills and left the soil a light beige depleted of most nutrients. The diminishing productivity of the land has forced many younger Chin to leave in search of other work, with Malaysia and India the most common interim destinations on the way to the America of their dreams. The populations of the various villages we visited appeared skewed towards the elderly and the children. As elsewhere in Burma, most government jobs in the state are reserved for ethnic Burmans, further diminishing the opportunities available to those Chin with higher educations. One of the fortunate few, UNICEF's local employee who monitors projects in Chin State is Chin. He said his job enabled him to travel all around the state so that he could witness what the Burmese authorities were doing in the state, and offer protection to the people by publicizing abuses.

¶5. (C) The Chin leaders with whom we spoke said that their economic situation had deteriorated since 1988; they

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professed to have done well under Ne Win's rule. While obviously poor, the Chin do not appear as destitute as the landless, stateless Rohingyas or Wa villagers, who have not shared in their leaders' narcotics-related wealth. The Chin lived in houses of milled wood with glass windows and zinc roofs, a step above the thatched, windowless homes seen in most rural parts of Burma. Those who have also traveled to the southern part of Chin State, described the north as the most prosperous part of the state.

¶6. (C) We saw little evidence of a military presence despite the proximity to the Indian border. The Chins, who call themselves Zomi, pointed out that the Mizos on the other side of the border are their ethnic cousins, with the result that they claimed to be able to travel freely back and forth to India without passports. The Indian Ambassador confirmed that passportless travel along this border is common and not a problem for India. He described this as a peaceful border in comparison to the Burmese-Indian border just north of Chin State. HIV infection reportedly has been less of a problem in Chin State than other parts of Burma (less than 1 % infection rate), but now is on the rise, according to medical personnel based in Chin State, as a result of truckers going back and forth to India. Separate reporting from India blames drugs coming from Burma for increasing HIV infections on the Indian side of the border.

¶7. (C) In one village of 300, we got confirmation that regime efforts to revamp local administration have gotten underway. We learned of a more democratic process than we have heard described elsewhere in Burma. The recently elected headman had been asked to leave his headman training to receive us. When asked about the election through interpreters, several villagers explained that they chose from three candidates; the winning candidate received 63 votes from heads of households versus 32 and 20 for the other two candidates. The winning candidate was not even present; he was in Rangoon following up on his son's request for political asylum in the

U.S. from Malaysia (obviously not a disqualifying factor). When asked why the winning candidate received so much support, another volunteered that he was seen as more honest and cared about the village.

U.S. the land of opportunity for Chin People

¶8. (C) Every where we stopped, we received requests for visas to the United States to work because of the poor conditions in Chin State and lack of opportunities. In one small village mentioned above, we met three families with children in Norway and Denmark, in addition to the U.S. asylum seeker. Other diplomats on the trip reported that whenever they asked people about their hopes for the future, they were told that the people wanted to go the U.S. Most people simply requested visas for friends and family to work in the U.S. so they could support their families and the church in Chin State. They often cited their close connections with American Baptists.

¶9. (C) Charge tried to explain that we did not offer that sort of visa and probed for any experiences with discrimination by Burmese authorities. However they downplayed discrimination, and repeated that there was no work and not enough land to farm for young people in Chin state. Religious figures did say that they could not freely build churches unless they bribed the authorities. However, based on the number of churches we saw under construction, the bribes did not appear too onerous, and bribes have become the norm around the country. In the past Chin attempts to erect crosses on mountain peaks have been blocked by the authorities; we only saw one area with crosses, near the most remote village we visited. Villagers are also subject to forced labor, like elsewhere throughout the country, primarily to build roads and farm tea plantations the

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authorities have promoted, but not singled out because of their religion, according to Chin leaders.

UNICEF working with Faith-based Organizations

¶10. (C) UNICEF focused on their health programs rather than education, but we did visit one UNICEF project promoting child-friendly schools, which emphasized more participatory activity by the children as opposed to the rote memorization in the regular Burmese classrooms. The school also had a Chin teacher paid for by the community to assist those students not fluent in Burmese. Although UNICEF has been restricted by the government from significant involvement in the primary and secondary schools, it has managed to get its foot in the door using health education (especially hand washing) and water projects to improve the health of the children attending school. The health education programs have been so successful, that the Ministry of Education will expand them to all primary schools in the country by 2009.

¶11. (C) UNICEF also gets health information out through the churches, which host regular training programs for village representatives using UNICEF materials. The group we saw had been elected by their fellow villagers and appeared equally divided between men and women. The churches and local NGOs also run UNICEF-sponsored early childhood development centers, one of the few educational activities international and local organizations can implement in Burma, for children of poor families and orphans. When asked if the government interfered with the church-based programs, a religious leader in Falam said no because of the UNICEF involvement.

¶12. (SBU) Most of the UNICEF sites we visited were sub-rural health clinics to which UNICEF supplies almost everything, including vaccines, birthing kits, anti-malarials and bednets, in addition to training the health workers. Not every village has a clinic with only 18 in one district of 68

villages. We saw two villages where the villagers built a clinic and house for the health workers, both Chins who had returned to their home villages after receiving training, as well as another community which built a school for their children. In some cases, communities hire Chin health assistants to assist Burmese staff. We also saw portions of UNICEF's cold chain for vaccines (UNICEF provides 90% of the vaccines in Burma) from the state hospital in Hakka, down to a village health clinic, with vaccines getting to the more remote destinations by horseback or foot. With minimal electricity even in the towns, the Japanese have funded solar refrigerators to preserve the vaccines.

¶13. (C) However, despite UNICEF assertions that their donated items should be distributed to those in need without charge, we learned that patients commonly were charged for medicines that should be free. A Chin doctor in Tedim confirmed that people must pay for everything, including bandaids, with the result that few people go to doctors or hospitals. This appeared to be more of a problem in the towns, rather than in the villages served only by a clinic. The state hospital in Hakka had only the most basic medicines and lab equipment; with roughly half the medicines provided by UNICEF. We recommended posting lists of what should be free and the prices of the other items so everyone knows.

¶14. (C) In addition to UNICEF, INGOS operating in Chin State include Care Australia, World Vision, and GRET. We receive regular reports from other channels that U.S. religious organizations also manage to provide assistance to the Chin people, despite their expulsion 40 years ago. The Chairman of the State Peace and Development Council, in response to a question by Charge, made it clear that U.S. churches could not officially assist the Chin people unless they had the approval of authorities in Nay Pyi Taw.

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¶15. (C) Chin State also has numerous indigenous NGOs, primarily church based. The Zomi Baptist Convention, through its Christian Social Service and Development Department, has attracted funding to sponsor programs providing agricultural development, water supply, small hydroelectric projects, skills training, and micro-finance. We visited an orphanage built by a local business family. A group of community leaders in Hakka had organized themselves to preserve Chin culture. At every stop, we met groups organized to build new churches and assembly halls. Many of the latter solicited funding from the diplomats. Projects to give women marketable skills and support the orphanages attracted greater donor interest.

¶16. (C) Comment: Given the scarcity of good news in Burma, this was a relatively good news story: the Chin people have managed to organize themselves to improve the situation of less advantaged Chin. Based on what we saw, the churches deserve most of the credit. The inability of Burmese in general to come together to achieve common interests is frustrating. Yet we saw the Chin could advance their interests in Burma today, despite discrimination, because they organized themselves. The Chin are no different from other Burmese in their aptitude for bickering; in Chin State the churches bicker with each other. Yet they manage to rise above the petty disputes to advance the community's interests, even if to assert the goodness of one church over another. Maybe this is not all bad, viewed instead as competition in the marketplace of religion. This visit also showed the ability of community-based programs like UNICEF's to get assistance and information to the lowest levels of society and make a positive difference. In order to do this, UNICEF needs allies inside the government, not the generals, but the sincere mid-level bureaucrats who know that they cannot address the nation's problems by themselves. If it were not for UNICEF, most Chin people would receive no health services.

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